

Socialist Action: 20 Years

A Look at the 1st 20 years of Socialist Action

by Michael Schreiber, *Editor of Socialist Action newspaper*



Following is the presentation by Socialist Action Editor Michael Schreiber to the Jan. 31 rally marking the 20th anniversary of this newspaper. The speech has been slightly edited for publication.

I am honored to represent Socialist Action at this important milestone of our history. I would like to thank the speakers and each one of you for participating—and for your dedication in enduring these hard seats at this late hour of the evening!

It is a privilege for me to be at the podium with Lynne Stewart and the many other activists that you have heard. It's good that

despite any differences we may have in our political perspectives, we can still unite in order to win the goals that we share.

This is an important occasion. It was 20 years ago—to be specific, December 1983—that the first issue of Socialist Action entered the arena as a revolutionary working-class newspaper written by and for activists in the struggle.

For younger people in this room, 20 years may seem like a very long time; for some of you, it is a lifetime. But as you get on in years (at least, I have found), 20 years has a knack of going by very quickly. It is only in

rare commemorations such as this that it is possible to take a moment to look backwards, and to reflect fully upon what was accomplished.

In this way, we can appreciate that every month without fail, Socialist Action newspaper has been produced and read by activists in this country and around the world. To date, we have put out 241 monthly editions of Socialist Action. That doesn't count the occasions, such as during both Gulf wars, when we produced two separate editions a month—in effect, converting our paper into a biweekly. And during these 20 years, we have sold well over half a million single copies.

Socialism dead?

Despite this, we all know that this accomplishment will provide an occasion for smirks and chuckles from people in some quarters: "What? They are celebrating socialism, of all things? Don't those people know that socialism is dead?"

That's the kind of commentary we might read, I am sure, in the pages of our commercial competitor, the San Francisco Chronicle, if they had bothered to send a correspondent to tonight's rally.

Twenty years ago, to be sure, these pundits (and even more the ruling-class circles that their publishers represent) considered the idea of socialism more of a threat than what they have had to contend with recently. The Stalinist leadership of the Soviet Union, although they had long ago converted the country into a bureaucratic police state, still masqueraded under the guise of being the inheritors of the program of the 1917 socialist revolution.

But flash forward a mere decade later, the Soviet Union had fallen. And China's Communist Party leadership—having recently slaughtered workers and students

demonstrating for socialist democracy—embarked on a program to privatize the country's economy while, under the slogan of "enrich yourself," building a system of sweatshops in which workers received mere pennies a day.

Under those international circumstances, the White House let it be known that they had finally vanquished the Soviet Evil Empire. At the same moment, this country's core of housebroken professors, historians, and economists were given the stage in order to interpret their glorious deed. And, thus encouraged, these intellectuals pronounced the verdict that socialism itself had been given a mortal blow, rather than admitting the fact that it was merely the Stalinist mockery of socialism that had died.

They proclaimed the eternal supremacy of capitalism in general and American capitalism in particular—and with the same finality with which the White House had announced at the time I was born that the 20th century was henceforth to be renamed "the American Century."

But there was a problem that the current apologists for U.S. capitalism chose to neglect. The "century" of unchallenged American economic dominance (short lived as it was; lasting perhaps 30 years) had been proclaimed in 1945 when Europe lay in ruins and Japan, already prostrate, had been nuked into ashes—and U.S. capital was ready and willing to build those countries' infrastructures once again. In the 1990s, on the other hand, the picture for capitalism was not quite so rosy, either in the United States or elsewhere.

And today, now that the speculative bubble of the last decade has turned into a bust, the structural deficiencies of capitalism have become far more evident. As the bosses find it difficult to make a profit in the current arena of saturated markets and worldwide competition, they must either scramble to

outdo the competition by retooling their industries with more efficient equipment (thus laying off workers) or close their doors altogether.

The bosses' constant campaign for more "productivity" in manufacturing can be glimpsed in the fact that from 1979 to 2000, U.S. factory output nearly doubled while the number of manufacturing jobs fell by 2.3 million. In the current three-year recession, another 2.8 million factory jobs have been lost.

General Motors makes about the same number of cars today as it did 25 years ago. But then it employed 454,000 workers; today merely 118,000 are on the payroll. During the same period, GM has cut the amount of human labor required to assemble a vehicle by 30 percent.

Whether or not GM can sell all the cars it produces, of course, is another question. American consumers are buying more and more commodities that have been imported from abroad (such as almost 40 percent of automobiles sold in the U.S. last year). These foreign products are often better and cheaper than domestic products, because they are produced with even more advanced machinery. Today over one fourth of goods consumed in this country are made abroad—about twice the share of the early 1980s.

In fact, the United States is falling behind its capitalist rivals, taken as a whole, in most all economic comparisons. The U.S. accounted for 25 percent of the world's manufacturing production in 1999, compared with 60 percent in 1950. The U.S. supplied half the world's gross product in 1950 compared with only 21 percent today.

Of course, at this juncture, Japan and most other countries of Western Europe are in as bad or worse economic shape than the United States, with unemployment at record post-World War II levels. And so each of

the wounded imperialist rivals must seek to recoup their economic health by strangling the so-called Third World countries, which more and more are reduced to penury as cheap sources of raw materials or semi-finished products put together by virtual slave labor.

The U.S. recolonization of Iraq has been factored into this situation. Viceroy Paul Bremmer and his cohorts have instituted shock therapy for their new colony. At first they asked for the privatization of at least 150 Iraqi state industries; under pressure, this was later scaled back to the privatization of 30, with the others (including the country's oil assets) slated for privatization at a later time.

By the same token, the capitalists here at home have gone on the offensive against working people, who find their standard of living slashed—as they work longer hours just to make ends meet. Now even the hard-won right for overtime compensation is liable to be dismantled while some two million workers are apt to lose their Medicare benefits during the next six months.

Working people in this country are angry—and looking for a change. Is it any wonder that the Democratic Party candidates have retooled their oratory so that it rings out with indignation against the "special interests," the "Washington lobbyists," and even the "war profiteers"? Is it any wonder that they stress the importance of "affordable health care" or of the fight to end poverty—as if their Democratic Party did anything significant to deal with those issues in the days when Clinton held the White House and they had a majority in Congress!

A new generation

Today, we can see that a new generation—which has been stirred by the huge antiwar movement of last spring or through the

environmental or other movements, is becoming convinced that the capitalist economic system and society needs to be fundamentally changed.

It is unfortunate, however, that many of these new activists, when they search out strategies to move forward, find themselves confronting a leadership that is itself a bit confused. This leadership, with few exceptions, has resigned itself to hanging onto the Democratic Party, which when it was in power did nothing for them.

The "dump Bush" campaign (that is, the register to vote and push doorbells for a Democrat campaign) now extends into every major movement for social change, including organizations and entire coalitions from United for Peace and Justice to the National Organization for Women.

Many prominent left and liberal commentators and intellectuals have also been taken in. Take a look at filmmaker Michael Moore, a man who has taken many courageous positions in his work and is seen as a spokesman for many critics of our political system. Moore, who says he is not really a Democrat, insists that the stakes in 2004 election are so high that he must back the Democrats and former general Wesley Clark for president.

Clark, of course, was the one who led the U.S. and its allies in their murderous air war on Yugoslavia. Clark authorized artillery barrages using 30,000 rounds of depleted uranium shells, and the unleashing of 13,000 cluster bombs—some of which continue to maim and kill children and farmers working in the fields. In one incident, 75 fleeing Albanians—whom the U.S. was ostensibly in the war in order to protect—were mowed down and killed by U.S. cluster bombs.

A least 12 civilians in a passenger train were killed by a U.S. aircraft, 16 in the Radio Serbia television studio, and 16 doing their

morning shopping in a market place in Nis. In regard to the slaughter of innocent people in Nis, Clark told a Pacifica radio reporter: "Unfortunately, we were at war, and terrible things happen."

Terrible things? Amnesty International said that the bombing of the TV studio was a war crime. One must question Michael Moore: How far is he prepared to go to "dump Bush," if he is willing to support and speak on behalf of a war criminal as Bush's replacement?

But of course General Clark isn't the only Democratic Party candidate. Even so-called antiwar candidate Howard Dean brags that he supported the first Gulf War as well as President Bush's war in Afghanistan.

A radical social movement can be effective only if it remains independent of the parties of the oppressors—or in this country the one oppressive party with two quite similar factions, Republican and Democrat. The idea of political independence is not really new. It was a matter of course to politicized workers several generations ago—in the early years of the 20th century. It was proven again by the Vietnam antiwar movement, and it will be crucial in the big battles that lie ahead.

What big battles am I speaking of? We in Socialist Action firmly believe that in the not too distant future capitalism will enter a profound crisis—much more severe than the economic recession we have just seen.

At that point, working people, out of desperate need, will be searching for real answers to their social problems, and the capitalists and their parties will find it difficult to present a political platform that will satisfy them.

Working people will be open to all sorts of ideas, all sorts of political platforms, all sorts of parties, and they will gravitate to

those that show promise of speaking to their interests and providing the direction for them to go to in order to solve their problems.

At that point, revolutionary socialism—which now finds its immediate audience only among an utter minority—will gain great appeal for millions, even the majority, of people. Any lingering commentary to the effect that "socialism is dead" will seem quaint and laughable to people who are fighting together in a mass movement to build a new society, one that puts the social needs of all far above the narrow profits of a wealthy handful.

This is the future that Socialist Action is

striving for—a future in which the great majority of people, working people and the oppressed, at last can determine their own destiny.

I don't know if the struggle for that future will take another 20 years. (When the workers take power, I'd love to be around to see it, and still spry enough to enjoy it!)

But the next few years, I promise, will be heroic ones. For this is the time when we must work hard, in order to lay the foundations of the party that will lead the American revolution. We in Socialist Action are dedicated to this task, and if you are not already a member of Socialist Action, we invite you to join us!

Subscribe to Socialist Action Newspaper!

Socialist Action is a national monthly newspaper covering international, national and local events and issues from a socialist and activist perspective. Don't miss an issue!

New subscribers - \$5/yr.
 Two year subscription - \$10

Subscription Renewal - \$8/yr.
 Six month subscription - \$3

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Send me info about the group Socialist Action which puts out this paper.
 Send me info about Youth for Socialist Action.

